

[Music, Art and Dance: Bali's Bedazzling Cultural Identity](#)

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Bali's Bedazzling Cultural Identity

Deftly adapting to new influences, Bali retains its graceful arts heritage

By Rajiv Malik, Bali

Creative and unique yet traditional, Bali's art is a reflection of its culture and its people. Temple architecture, dance costumes, paintings, everyday utensils and even food manifest an unmistakable style, with lively curves full of movement and distinctive, pointed ornaments. The Balinese are a celebratory people with high aesthetic tastes, and art in its many forms is essential to them. On this island, beauty is a sacred form of worship.

Most art in Bali is based on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata--though it may not seem so to untrained eyes--and also on indigenous stories, where Barong and Rangda play a large role. It is through art, music, dance and puppets that the epic sacred stories are conveyed here, not through kathak and other spoken methods as in India. Damar Wayanag, a member of the former royal family of Ubud and a consultant in Balinese culture, explains, "Religion is the spirit of culture here in Bali."

From the 16th to the 20th century, East Bali was the center of classical Balinese art. During the early 1900s, Ubud established a reputation as the new cultural epicenter. Ubud and Batuan are known for their paintings, Mas for woodcarving, Celuk for gold and silver smiths, and Batubulan for stone carving.

A Recent Revolution in Painting

Until the 1920s, Bali's painting followed the traditional kamasan style, with

two-dimensional drawings drawn on cloth or ulatanga (bark) paper. Colors were limited to available natural dyes, mostly red, ochre and black. With the arrival of many Western artists in the 1930s, Bali became an artists' enclave. Local artists experimented with new materials and colors, merging old and new with ease, but the results were still distinctively Balinese. This so-called "modern traditional Balinese painting" thrives, highly regarded, to this day. It is on display at several museums worldwide, notably at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the Leiden Museum, the Asian Art Museum in Fukuoka and the Singapore National Art Museum. Hinduism Today so admires the style it has commissioned paintings from Bali over the years.

Ida Bagus Jembawan, 51, is a painter and art teacher in Ubud. His atelier is crowded with sketches and vibrant paintings of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, full of the dynamic force and mystical quality typical of Balinese art. Though the noises of roosters and the laughter of small children compete for his attention, Jembawan, a quiet and unassuming character, remains immersed in his craft.

"I feel my paintings will encourage people to worship the Gods. I do paintings and art for the temples for free," says Jembawan. "I get up at 4 in the morning to paint. I also give classes at an art school from 7 am to 2 pm; after some rest, I paint some more until 6 pm or later. If I work continuously on one painting, it takes me around one month to complete it. Life is a struggle because I have five children to raise, but I am quite contented as an artist."

His wife, Anak Agung Raka Putri, is a greatly skilled artist of another kind. She creates intricate canangs, the beautiful offerings taken to Gods at the temple. A canang is a square basket made of a coconut-palm leaf, filled with fruits, sugar cane, rice and betel nuts and topped with a wide variety of colorful flowers and shredded leaves. She told Hinduism Today that even though the younger generation is enthralled by the lure of the West and fancy tech gadgets, the young girls eagerly and lovingly learn the traditional art of making offerings. In Balinese culture it is the women's duty to care for the family shrine and make sure that all the necessary materials are available for the husbands or priests to invoke the Gods. Only then will the Deities come and bless their families.

Ketut Budiana, a local master painter, creates art as a sadhana. "The paintings I love I do not sell at any price. These paintings are a lesson for me. For instance, there is a painting entitled 'Teertha, the Generator of Life.' Through this painting I

am trying to explore how to discover the nectar of life. To create a work of art, one has to do a lot of penance. One has to do a lot of hard work." Budiana's inspirations reflect his lofty intentions. "Yoga and kundalini awakening are my favorite subjects. Through my paintings I want to promote peace in the world. I want to highlight that the environment should not be disturbed, but before that we have to learn not to be ruffled ourselves. We use the Balinese akshar (alphabet) which originates from the nada (sound) of nature. For instance, we make the paintings based on the nada of the waves. Nature is my guru, and you are my guru, too."

Art in Buildings and Temples

Bali's unique artistic style is quite evident in temple architecture. I Nyoman Artana, an expert in udangi, temple building, says, " In Bali every village already has its temples, so not many new temples are being built; but a lot of renovation work is being done. We follow the ancient rules of construction. The entire layout of the building is done as per ast kaushala kaushali. I learned temple architecture from my father and other senior members of my clan." Artana sees his art as a craft so sacred he will not accept money for it; being a udangi is not his daytime job. "No udangis would do temple work for money. Usually udangis would have a business or profession to support their families. We build big temples and homes, but we sometimes have no proper home ourselves. Even if we did have money, an udangi is expected to spend it in service of the community."

Dancing Is for Everyone

The Ancak Saji Ubud Palace Court Yard, built in the 16th century, is one of the noblest stages on the island. Its dance and drama performances brim with finesse, vigorous movement and a youthful swirl of energy and color, expressing not just professional virtuosity but the dedication of a people who love their art.

"Bali is one of the few remaining places where one can still experience sacred theater and art done by common people. Someone who harvests rice all day long might change into an elaborate costume and ride his bicycle to perform on stage at night," explains Erika Batdorf, a Canadian performer who lived in Bali.

Tourism is the backbone of the economy, and the government wisely throws its weight behind the people's love for the arts. "The government is invested in our art and culture," says dancer Dr. Nyoman Catra, a professor at the Indonesian Institute of Arts. "Formal art education is available in high school. Villages also locally

promote performances. In addition there are private schools, known as sanggar, which help to preserve the culture."

Dr. Catra feels confident about the future of Hinduism on the island and the endurance of their culture. "We are not afraid that Balinese art and culture will be swept out by modern Western culture. Youth can perform at the temple festivals; there are also hundreds of performances at the Bali Arts Festival held every year for one month in June/July. Young people are trained in the performing arts everywhere in Bali."

Dr. Catra believes the religious spirit and content infused in art also contributes to its endurance, even as tourism exerts a pull. "The soul of the art and culture in Bali is Hinduism. Hindu traditions are there in offerings, performance and culture. When you go to the temple, or to weddings and cremations, you always go in the traditional costumes. I perform as a dancer in temple rituals. I make intensive use of our masks during performances. Once I performed in New Delhi with multiple masks, and the audience took a deep interest. Our performances are effective and powerful because we do them as an offering to the Gods, or as part of ritual--and not just for pleasure. This is devotion.

"It's true that tourism has affected some of the local traditions. Some performances of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are held specifically for the tourists. I have been performing in these as Hanuman, and I see that the quality of performance declines; it becomes a repetitive, everyday event rather than a rare celebration. But from another angle the tourists help in maintaining the culture by paying for keeping it alive. So tourism here is a mixed blessing; it both preserves and destroys."

Dance Styles

Balinese dance follows the rhythms produced by the ever-present gamelan. In Balinese music you can also hear metallophones, gongs and xylophones, along with the anklung (a bamboo rattle) and the rebab (a two-stringed spike fiddle). There are fewer codified dance hand positions and gestures, the mudras, in Bali and Java than in India.

Bali has several distinct styles. The popular Barong dance enacts the endless

struggle of the good God Barong against the evil personified by Goddess Rangda. At the end, evil is always subdued, though never vanquished. The Legong dance is a refined form characterized by intricate finger movements, complicated footwork, and expressive gestures and facial expressions, which probably originated in the 19th century as royal entertainment. Legong dancers are always girls who have not yet reached puberty. They begin rigorous training at about the age of five. These dancers are regarded highly in the society and usually become wives of royal personages or wealthy merchants. Legend tells of a prince who fell ill and had a vivid dream in which two maidens danced to the sound of gamelan music. When he recovered, he arranged for such dances to be performed in reality. Others believe that the Legong originated with the sanghyang dedari, a ceremony involving voluntary possession of two little girls by beneficent spirits. In Legong, the little actresses are accompanied by a third dancer called a tjondong or attendant. She sets the scene, presents the dancers with their fans and later plays the part of the raven.

Most famous is probably the Kecak dance, also known as the Ramayana Monkey Chant. A circle of 150 or more performers wearing checked cloth around their waists, percussively chanting "cak" and throwing up their arms, depict a battle from the Ramayana where Hanuman helped Prince Rama fight the evil King Ravana. Originating in the 1930s, Kecak has roots in sanghyang, a trance-inducing exorcism dance. Living in Bali at the time, German painter and musician Walter Spies became deeply interested in that ritual and recreated it as a drama for tourist audiences, basing it on the Hindu Ramayana and including dance. An innovation was to only use voices and not the gamelan.

Also popular in both Bali and Java is the shadow puppet theater. Some puppets are crafted from hide and mounted on bamboo sticks; others are flat woodcarvings barely one-fourth inch thick. When held up between an oil lamp or electric bulb and a piece of white cloth, shadows are cast on the screen.

An Example to Be Followed

Babies born into the families of Balinese dancers learn the craft from infancy. Music rocks their cradle, and their mother teaches them to dance doing mudras with their little hands before they can walk. Official training as a dancer starts early. "My own son performed for the first time when he was five years old," says Dr. Catra.

The professional dancers of Bali earn their living from giving classes as much as

they do from performing. I Wayan Karta, a 51-year-old dancer, learned the art first from his father, and later at dance and music schools. "Now I teach dancing, singing and music at school. I teach the children how to play gamelan in a private school. I also teach traditional classical dance to the foreigners. And because we are so happy to see our children taking an interest in our tradition, many colleagues and I go to villages and teach dance and music to the children for free. My wife is a stage make-up artist, and she comes with me."

Hinduism Today visited a private school in Klungkung where children learn the traditional Balinese dances, paying the teacher by the hour. Some of the children were paying her out of their own pocket money. Would that children everywhere were so keen to learn and live their tradition, following the lead of the remarkable island of Bali.